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# HOME TEACHING AS A PROFESSION

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# HOME TEACHING AS A PROFESSION

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ALTHOUGH I AM relatively a new comer to the field of home teaching, my thinking about this business of home teaching has passed through several transitional stages. That it is a profession I am sure, but the question about which I have been pondering is just where in professional activity does it belong—to which other profession is it related.

First, I saw it as a part of the field of education. The home teacher was just what the name implies; a person who went into a home and taught someone something. The emphasis was on the teaching and learning of a given skill. As time went on, however, I began to see that there was more involved than an educative process. It became clear that if the person being taught were to gain from what the home teacher had to give, there must be added to the teaching process an understanding of what the client needed to learn. I moved into the second stage in my thinking about home teaching: it was that of seeing the work as related to occupational therapy. The home teacher taught skills and activities to give the client something to keep him busy and whenever possible hoped that the training would contribute to rehabilitating the client so that he might function in industry, a sheltered workshop, or a home industry program if such were available.

Gradually, however, I have come to see home teaching as a part of the profession of social work with similar aims and goals.

Social work has been defined as "professional service to people for the purpose of

assisting them as individuals and in groups to attain satisfactory relationships and standards of living in accordance with their particular wishes."

The home teacher gives professional service to people to assist them as individuals to attain—as nearly as possible—satisfactory relationships and standards in accordance with their particular wishes. True, the home teacher does teach skills, but the teaching of these skills is not the end result. The home teacher teaches to give the client skills with the purpose always in view of enabling the client, through a better understanding and greater acceptance of himself, to use the experience he has had with the home teacher to work out better relationships with his family, friends, and community; and in some instances hopefully to achieve a means of influencing his standards of living through greater economic return, the use of the products which he can create as a result of his increased skill, or the greater knowledge of the tools of living; helping the homemaker with the problems of housework and care of the children and the gardener to more easily tend his vegetables and flowers. May I call your attention to the last three words of the definition of social work just quoted: "their particular wishes." It seems to me this is one significant characteristic of home teaching as a part of the larger profession of social work. Ideally, in the professional practice of social work, the client is left completely free to make choices for himself as to whether



he wishes the services of the home teacher and what he wishes to do with those services if he chooses to use them.

Believe me, being a home teacher with the approach of the educator, who has a various array of skills to teach, and expecting the client to learn some one or more of those skills, is far easier than the discipline required to patiently work through with the client the decision as to whether he wishes to use the home teacher or not. The home teacher, with a knowledge of social case work, recognizes the right of self-determination. She knows that unless the client decides to use the home teacher on his own, entirely free from fear of the authority of the teacher, the agency which sends the teacher, or any other agency or member of the community, the result of the teaching will be far less effective. The teacher will wonder why Mr. J., who has physical and intellectual capacity, does not achieve more. We have more energy to invest if the thing we undertake is done so because we wish to do that thing more than anything else which we might choose.

After the client chooses to use the services of the home teacher—if that teacher has a knowledge of principles of casework—the teacher will give careful thought to what are the client's ambitions; interests; emotional, intellectual and physical capacities and problems. The teacher proceeding in this manner is always aware of the differences between people. The worker is cognizant that to achieve the maximum the client must be worked with on his own level, utilizing whatever he can bring to the new experience rather than superimposing an entire new set of skills and patterns of thinking. This does not mean that the home teacher does not work toward change, but the changes will probably come slowly. It is a process of continual incorporation and intermingling of the new with the old in the client's experience.

Some clients may never be able to change; they may not want to change. The profession-

ally trained, skillful home teacher is so disciplined that she can accept this denial of her efforts. Here the home teacher, trained in the field of social work, has other tools which he or she will want to use.

There is no place for the home teacher who is judgmental in thinking about clients, their failures, things they do, attitudes they express. The client is accepted as he is. There is no place for condemnation or condoning. If the client fails, we do not condemn or blame. We ask ourselves, and if it seems wise, we ask the client why things did not work out. Who of us here has not experienced the paralyzing effects of the blocking which follows negative criticism?

If the client succeeds, we are thoughtful in giving approval. Approval from the teacher may spur the client on to new and more difficult work. It may carry him over periods of discouragement. On the other hand, the client may come to work for the satisfaction of being praised by the teacher; he may achieve to please the worker; he may come to depend on that approval. The client may develop an increased fear of failure.

Mr. D. had been severely disappointed and inconvenienced because the agency on which he depended had not functioned so that the worker could keep a promise which she had made to him. The worker had had several difficult interviews with him, assisting him to work through his feelings about the situation. She called after an absence of a few weeks. Mr. D. was cheerful and seemed to be taking the situation in the socially accepted manner of "like a man". The worker told Mr. D. what a fine attitude he had, how fine it was that he could look on what had been a trying and disappointing experience in such a cheerful way. Then she thought of what her words had meant. Maybe Mr. D. did not feel cheerful about the situation; maybe way down inside he was not taking it like a man; maybe he felt anger toward the worker and agency but was afraid to continue expressing



it, fearing the disapproval of the worker and her retaliation, all of which was not conducive to Mr. D's best growth and emotional health. After such outspoken approval of this positive attitude toward a terribly bad situation, would he feel free to talk through his feelings with this or another worker should another similar situation develop? The worker realized that by reacting to Mr. D. in a lay manner instead of in the professional disciplined way of the non-judgmental home teacher with case work background, she had set up a blocking which was not wholesome.

At the time Mrs. J. was referred to me by the case worker, I was given a picture of a very troubled person. On my first visit Mrs. J. was cheerful. She talked about her difficulties freely but said things were going better. She seemed interested in the services of home teaching and easily decided which of the services she wished to use. I felt Mrs. J. was a person who would move along quickly and without difficulty. On my second visit, I found Mrs. J. a changed person. She was fearful, made decisions slowly, acted slowly, was doubtful about her ability to achieve. I saw an environmental factor which might have upset her, but did wonder about the situation. I greeted her most cheerfully. I continually told Mrs. J. of her ability to learn and succeed. Because of the capacity which I was sure she had, not only from my observation at the time of the first interview, but her past record, I assigned amounts of work larger than I ordinarily would have given. I sensed that something was wrong; so I quickly said that if she could not accomplish all that I had assigned, it would be all right. She should do whatever she could. Two days later the case worker called me to see what I had observed about Mrs. J. At the regular interview with the case worker, Mrs. J. had appeared terribly depressed. In the rush of work, I had dismissed Mrs. J's situation from my mind. Quickly I recalled what had happened. In the particular agency setting in

which I work, there is a division of function between the work of the home teacher and that of the case worker. After considerable discussion, the worker and I decided that it would be wise to discuss this case with the case work supervisor in the agency. To the case worker the importance of helping Mrs. J. talk about the things which were bothering her, of discussing her life with her husband, his death, and her feelings about the young son who lived in the home with her was stressed. My role was to be one of accepting Mrs. J. as a fearful, depressed, upset person. My work was to be directed toward the end of diverting her mind into channels of activity outside herself. I was not to bounce in with a "Lions Club", cheery greeting. Mrs. J. did not feel cheerful. To her there was nothing to be cheerful about. Could I not understand that she could not be cheerful? To Mrs. J. at this particular time, achievement was impossible. If I insisted that it was, she would only become more discouraged. I was to allow Mrs. J. to set her own pace for working. If she did nothing, that would be all right. If she did a great deal, that would be all right, too. I have used this procedure a number of times since the J. case was being considered. It is wise, however, to recognize as accurately as possible the diagnostic signs in order to know on which clients it should be used and when it should not. If I were to use the methods employed in the J. case in dealing with Mrs. G., and not be cheerful to Mrs. G., who feels that being cheerful regardless of how things are bothering her is most important, she would feel less confident and be completely thrown off in her relationship with me.

May I again emphasize the importance of understanding the client, his strengths and limitations, and of working with him in keeping with these, of asking why the client has failed to come up to our expectations. Often it is helpful to turn for skilled case work or psychiatric consultation before we decide how to proceed with the difficult case



of Mrs. Smith, Miss Brown, or Mr. Anderson.

The skilled home teacher also realizes the importance of establishing what is known in the case work field as a good relationship. This implies that the client feels at ease with the teacher; that he may say anything he wishes and act with as much freedom as possible during the time he and the teacher are working together and that the worker will not mind and will accept him just the same whether the client is accepting or rejecting. (It means that the client has confidence in the teacher.) It is often surprising, the degree of development and achievement a client can experience when this relationship is present. We can see this same client with another teacher when this relationship is absent, and he will do little more than stand still, and there have been instances in which the client has even regressed.

What can the teacher do to establish and maintain this relationship?

a. The client must be accepted—good or bad, interested or disinterested, agreeable or hostile, succeeding or failing, conforming or not conforming to the approved *mores* of the social group, before he will be completely at ease with the teacher. This complete acceptance of any and all clients, regardless of what they do, is not easy. This does not mean that the worker necessarily approves of what the client does, but it does mean that the worker should try to understand why the client behaves as he does and can separate the client from his behavior.

I called on Mrs. W. She complained because I came so early in the afternoon. She ran her radio so loud that it was almost impossible to talk with her; she stressed at length what my two predecessors had done for her; she let me know that she doubted if I would be able to do as much; she hoped I would not stay long because I was interrupting her nap and radio programs; and she did not care when I came again. I found that I had to work to establish a relationship

with Mrs. W. I found difficult to separate her behavior from her and to understand why she was so hostile. The supervisor who read the record of this interview was a most understanding person. I talked my feelings over with her and learned from her detachment what might have gone into the situation. She suggested that Mrs. W. may have been hostile to me because of a disappointing and lonely life; because of hostility toward the two previous home teachers which she had never been able to express and was now denying by telling me how much she had liked them and permitting this hostility to focus on me. She suggested that the more of this hostility which Mrs. W. was releasing I could accept without reacting in kind, the quicker she would respond to me in a positive manner. I was able to go back and work with Mrs. W.

b. Have respect for the integrity of the client as a human being. Remember at all times that he has feelings which differ only little from ours. Occasionally, mentally reverse roles and imagine how you would feel if you were the client and he the worker.

Never fail to show the client the respect of making an appointment with him. This is a subject on which an entire paper might be written. After having made that appointment, keep it. If you find that you cannot do so, remember that there are always telephones, telegrams, and special delivery letters.

I had made an appointment with Miss F. The evening before the morning appointment, my supervisor, who had her headquarters in another town, called to say that she could be in the city in which I was working the following day and could only see me the next morning. I forgot that Miss F. had a phone. It was late afternoon before I reached her home. She had made an appointment at the clinic for the afternoon because she thought I would be there in the morning. She had waited for me until she was late for the clinic appointment. I missed seeing her altogether. During the remainder of my con-



tact with Miss F., contact which was cut short because of my leaving the agency, she was most negligent about keeping appointments. There were many times that I failed to see her because of this. I was never able to put our relationship on the same good basis as that on which we had been working before this broken appointment.

c. Confidence of the client in the worker is essential. The client must know that he can trust the teacher. The teacher is obligated to maintain complete confidentiality of the client's activity and identity. It is so easy to discuss a client's situation and problems with friends whom we feel cannot possibly know the person about whom we are talking. A short time ago one of my fellow workers was having dinner with a group of friends whose economic and social position was at the opposite end of the scale from that of the client about whom she told an interesting incident. She was amazed and most chagrined when one of the women commented that through her husband she had heard about the man being discussed and proceeded to launch forth into a detailed discussion of the client's situation.

Several times in the last few weeks my clients have asked the names of others on whom I call in order to learn if I visit any of their friends. I have refused consistently to give such information, explaining to them that just as they would not wish me to discuss them with others, so others should not be discussed with them. During the time I spend with them they and their situations are my chief interest. It is of the greatest importance for the teacher to talk with and gain permission of the client before consulting any outside source concerning the client or his problem. After this permission is granted, it is wise for the worker to let the client know the result of the discussion about him. This is an area in which all of us slip on occasion but one in which we should be most careful.

It is impossible for me to stop talking with you without mentioning one more point. To me this is something which all home teachers, as well as others in the field of social work, should consider very seriously. If we have achieved in this area, other of the points which I have mentioned will fall into place naturally and easily. It is the part of home teaching which is, perhaps, most difficult and can, but should not, be taken lightly. I am talking about this business of understanding one's self, of feeling secure with one's self, of accepting one's self. To know, and accept one's strengths, limitations, and weaknesses and be sure that one has done this is not only difficult but is exceedingly painful and requires the willingness to change. Generally when we look at ourselves squarely, we are not too satisfied with what we see. We all are apt to do far less than we would like for the client in helping him without this self understanding. How can we really expect to understand others unless we understand ourselves, and how can we really help others unless we understand them? Are we helping others because we want to? This can affect our capacity to help. Or, are we using our work as home teachers to satisfy some of our deeper personal needs such as the need to dominate, to be parental, to show our own skills, to gain approval.

Just one more thing. All of the points I have made this morning are ideals to be striven for. Their achievement does not come in a day, month, or year; but each time we home teachers can act in accordance with one of them we are being a little more helpful to the client. We are becoming more than a pedagogue. We are becoming a person who is enabling another person to use and mobilize more of his strengths and capacities to rise above the limitations within himself or his environment and become a happier, better adjusted, and more productive member of society.



